

IS THERE A GOD?

BY

CHARLES BRADLAUGH

From Charles Bradlaugh's Theological Essays

London: Printed by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh
63, Fleet Street, London, E.C.-1887

Rosings Digital Publications



IS THERE A GOD?

BY CHARLES BRADLAUGH

THE initial difficulty is in defining the word "God." It is equally impossible to intelligently affirm or deny any proposition unless there is at least an understanding, on the part of the affirmer or denier, of the meaning of every word used in the proposition. To me the word "God" standing alone is a word without meaning. I find the word repeatedly used even by men of education and refinement, and who have won reputation in special directions of research, rather to illustrate their ignorance than to explain their knowledge. Various sects of Theists do affix arbitrary meanings to the word "God," but often these meanings are in their terms self-contradictory, and usually the definition maintained by one sect of Theists more or less contradicts the definition put forward by some other sect. With the Unitarian Jew, the Trinitarian Christian, the old Polytheistic Greek, the modern Universalist, or the Calvinist, the word "God" will in each case be intended to express a proposition absolutely irreconcilable with those of the other sects. In this brief essay, which can by no means be taken as a complete answer to the question which forms its title, I will for the sake of argument take the explanation of the word "God" as given with great carefulness by Dr. Robert Flint, Professor of Divinity in the University of Edinburgh, in two works directed by him against Atheism. He defines God ("Antitheistic Theories," p. 1,) as "a supreme, self-existent, omnipotent, omniscient, righteous and benevolent being who is distinct from and independent of what he has created;" ("Theism," p. 1,) as "a self-existent, eternal being, infinite in power and wisdom, and perfect in holiness and goodness, the maker of heaven and earth;" and (p. 18,) "the creator and preserver of nature, the governor of nations, the heavenly father and judge of man;" (p. 18,) "one infinite personal;" (p. 42,) "the one infinite" being "who "is a person — is a free and loving intelligence;" (p. 59,) "the creator, preserver, and ruler of all finite beings;" (p. 65,) "not only the ultimate cause, but the supreme intelligence;" and (p. 74,) "the supreme moral intelligence is an unchangeable being." That is, in the above statements "God" is defined by Professor Flint to be: *A supreme, self-existent, the one infinite, eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, unchangeable, righteous, and benevolent, personal being, creator and preserver of nature, maker of heaven and earth; who is distinct from and independent of what he has created, who is a free, loving, supreme, moral intelligence, the governor of nations, the heavenly father and judge of man.*

The two volumes, published by William Blackwood and Son, from which this definition has been collected, form the Baird

Lectures in favor of Theism for the years 1876 and 1877. Professor Flint has a well-deserved reputation as a clear thinker and writer of excellent ability as a Theistic advocate. I trust, therefore, I am not acting unfairly in criticising his definition. My first objection is, that to me the definition is on the face of it so self-contradictory that a negative answer must be given to the question, Is there such a God? The association of the word “supreme” with the word “infinite” as descriptive of a “personal being” is utterly confusing. “Supreme” can only be used as expressing comparison between the being to whom it is applied, and some other being with whom that “supreme” being is assumed to have possible points of comparison and is then compared. But “the one infinite being” cannot be compared with any other infinite being, for the wording of the definition excludes the possibility of any other infinite being, nor could the infinite being — for the word “one” may be dispensed with, as two infinite beings are unthinkable — be compared with any finite being. “Supreme” is an adjective of relation and is totally inapplicable to “the infinite.” It can only be applied to one of two or more finites. “Supreme” with “omnipotent” is pleonastic. If it is said that the word “supreme” is now properly used to distinguish between the Creator and the created, the governor and that which is governed, then it is clear that the word “supreme” would have been an inapplicable word of description to “the one infinite being” prior to creation, and this would involve the declaration that the exact description of the unchangeable has been properly changed, which is an absurdity. The definition affirms “creation,” that is, affirms “God” existing prior to such creation — *i.e.*, then the sole existence; but the word “supreme” could not then apply. An existence cannot be described as “highest” when there is none other; therefore, none less high. The word “supreme” as a word of description is absolutely contradictory of Monism. Yet Professor Flint himself says (“Anti-Theistic Theories,” p. 132), “that reason, when in quest of an ultimate explanation of things, imperatively demands unity, and that only a Monistic theory of the universe can deserve the name of a philosophy.” Professor Flint has given no explanation of the meaning he attaches to the word “self-existent.” Nor, indeed, has he given any explanation of any of his words of description. By self-existent I mean that to which you cannot conceive antecedent. By “infinite” I mean immeasurable, illimitable, indefinable; *i.e.*, that of which I cannot predicate extension, or limitation of extension. By “eternal” I mean illimitable, indefinable, *i.e.*, that of which I cannot predicate limitation of duration or progression of duration.

“Nature” is with me the same as “universe,” the same as “existence;” *i.e.*, I mean by it: The totality of all phenomena, and of all that has been, is, or may be necessary for the happening of each

and every phenomenon. It is from the very terms of the definition, self-existent, eternal, infinite. I cannot think of nature commencement, discontinuity, or creation. I am unable to think backward to the possibility of existence not having been. I cannot think forward to the possibility of existence ceasing to be. I have no meaning for the word "create" except to denote change of condition. Origin of "universe" is to me absolutely unthinkable. Sir William Hamilton ("Lectures and Discussions," p. 610) affirms: that when aware of a new appearance we are utterly unable to conceive that there has originated any new existence; that we are utterly unable to think that the complement of existence has ever been either increased or diminished; that we can neither conceive nothing becoming something, or something becoming nothing. Professor Flint's definition affirms "God" as existing "distinct from, and independent of, what he has created." But what can such words mean when used of the "infinite?" Does "distinct from" mean separate from? Does the "universe" existing distinct from God mean in addition to? and in other place than? or, have the words no meaning?

Of all words in Professor Flint's definition, which would be appropriate if used of human beings, I mean the same as I should mean if I used the same words in the highest possible degree of any human being. Here I maintain the position taken by John Stuart Mill in his examination of Sir W. Hamilton (p. 122). Righteousness and benevolence are two of the words of description included in the definition of this creator and governor of nations. But is it righteous and benevolent to create men and govern nations so that the men act criminally and the nations seek to destroy one another in war? Professor Flint does not deny ("Theism," p. 256) "that God could have originated a sinless moral system," and he adds: "I have no doubt that God has actually made many moral beings who are certain never to oppose their own wills to his, or that he might, if he had so pleased, have created only such angels as were sure to keep their first estate." But it is inaccurate to describe a "God" as righteous or benevolent who, having the complete power to originate a sinless moral system, is admitted to have originated a system in which sinfulness and immorality were not only left possible, but have actually, in consequence of God's rule and government, become abundant. It cannot be righteous for the "omnipotent" to be making human beings contrived and designed by his omniscience so as to be fitted for the commission of sin. It cannot be benevolent in "God" to contrive and create a hell in which he is to torment the human beings who have sinned because made by him in sin. "God," if omnipotent and omniscient, could just as easily, and much more benevolently, have contrived that there should never be any sinners, and, therefore, never any need for hell or torment.

The Rev. R.A. Armstrong, with whom I debated this question, says: —

“‘Either,’ argues Mr. Bradlaugh, in effect, ‘God could make a world without suffering, or he could not. If he could and did not, he is not all-good. If he could not, he is not all-powerful.’ The reply is, What do you mean by all-powerful? If you mean having power to reconcile things in themselves contradictory, we do not hold that God is all-powerful. But a humanity, from the first enjoying immunity from suffering, and yet possessed of nobility of character, is a self-contradictory conception.”

That is, Mr. Armstrong thinks that a “sinless moral system from the first is a self-contradictory conception.”

It is difficult to think a loving governor of nations arranging one set of cannibals to eat, and another set of human beings to be eaten by their fellow-men. It is impossible to think a loving creator and governor contriving a human being to be born into the world the pre-natal victim of transmitted disease. It is repugnant to reason to affirm this “free loving supreme moral intelligence” planning and contriving the enduring through centuries of criminal classes, plague-spots on civilisation.

The word “unchangeable” contradicts the word “creator.” Any theory of creation must imply some period when the being was not yet the creator, that is, when yet the creation was not performed, and the act of creation must in such case, at any rate, involve temporary or permanent change in the mode of existence of the being creating. So, too, the words of description “governor of nations” are irreconcilable with the description “unchangeable,” applied to a being alleged to have existed prior to the creation of the “nations,” and therefore, of course, long before any act of government could be exercised.

To speak of an infinite personal being seems to me pure contradiction of terms. All attempts to think “person” involve thoughts of the limited, finite, conditioned. To describe this infinite personal being as distinct from some thing which is postulated as “what he has created” is only to emphasise the contradiction, rendered perhaps still more marked when the infinite personal being is described as “intelligent.”

The Rev. R.A. Armstrong, in a prefatory note to the report of his debate with myself on the question “Is it reasonable to worship God?” says: “I have ventured upon alleging an intelligent cause of the phenomena of the universe, in spite of the fact that in several of his writings Mr. Bradlaugh has described intelligence as implying limitations. But though intelligence, as known to us in man, is always hedged within limits, there is no difficulty in conceiving each and every limit as removed. In that case the essential conception of intelligence remains the same precisely, although the change of conditions revolutionises its mode of working.” This, it

seems to me, is not accurate. The word intelligence can only be accurately used of man, as in each case meaning the totality of mental ability, its activity and result. If you eliminate in each case all possibilities of mental ability there is no "conception of intelligence" left, either essential or otherwise. If you attempt to remove the limits, that is the organisation, the intelligence ceases to be thinkable. It is unjustifiable to talk of "change of conditions" when you remove the word intelligence as a word of application to man or other thinking animal, and seek to apply the word to the unconditional.

As an Atheist I affirm one existence, and deny the possibility of more than one existence; by existence meaning, as I have already stated, "the totality of all phenomena, and of all that has been, is, or may be necessary for the happening of any and every phenomenon." This existence I know in its modes, each mode being distinguished in thought by its qualities. By "mode" I mean each cognised condition; that is, each phenomenon or aggregation of phenomena. By "quality" I mean each characteristic by which in the act of thinking I distinguish.

The distinction between the Agnostic and the Atheist is that either the Agnostic postulates an unknowable, or makes a blank avowal of general ignorance. The Atheist does not do either; there is of course to him much that is yet unknown, every effort of inquiry brings some of this within reach of knowing. With "the unknowable" conceded, all scientific teaching would be illusive. Every real scientist teaches without reference to "God" or "the unknowable." If the words come in as part of the yesterday habit still clinging to-day, the scientist conducts his experiments as though the words were not. Every operation of life, of commerce, of war, of statesmanship, is dealt with as though God were non-existent. The general who asks God to give him victory, and who thanks God for the conquest, would be regarded as a lunatic by his Theistic brethren, if he placed the smallest reliance on God's omnipotence as a factor in winning the fight. Cannon, gunpowder, shot, shell, dynamite, provision, men, horses, means of transport, the value of these all estimated, then the help of "God" is added to what is enough without God to secure the triumph. The surgeon who in performing some delicate operation relied on God instead of his instruments — the physician who counted on the unknowable in his prescription — these would have poor clientele even amongst the orthodox; save the peculiar people the most pious would avoid their surgical or medical aid. The "God" of the Theist, the "unknowable" of the Agnostic, are equally opposed to the Atheistic affirmation. The Atheist enquires as to the unknown, affirms the true, denies the untrue. The Agnostic knows not of any proposition whether it be true or false.

Pantheists affirm one existence, but Pantheists declare that at any rate some qualities are infinite, *e.g.*, that existence is infinitely intelligent. I, as an Atheist, can only think qualities of phenomena. I know each phenomenon by its qualities. I know no qualities except as the qualities of some phenomenon.

So long as the word "God" is undefined I do not deny "God." To the question, Is there such a God as defined by Professor Flint, I am compelled to give a negative reply. If the word "God" is intended to affirm Dualism, then as a Monist I negate "God."

The attempts to prove the existence of God may be divided into three classes: — 1. Those which attempt to prove the objective existence of God from the subjective notion of necessary existence in the human mind, or from the assumed objectivity of space and time, interpreted as the attributes of a necessary substance. 2. Those which "essay to prove the existence of a supreme self-existent cause, from the mere fact of the existence of the world by the application of the principle of causality, starting with the postulate of any single existence whatsoever, the world, or anything in the world, and proceeding to argue backwards or upwards, the existence of one supreme cause is held to be regressive inference from the existence of these effects." But it is enough to answer to these attempts, that if a supreme existence were so demonstrable, that bare entity would not be identifiable with "God." "A demonstration of a primitive source of existence is of no formal theological value. It is an absolute zero."

3. The argument from design, or adaptation, in nature, the fitness of means to an end, implying, it is said, an architect or designer. Or, from the order in the universe, indicating, it is said, an orderer or lawgiver, whose intelligence we thus discern.

But this argument is a failure, because from finite instances differing in character it assumes an infinite cause absolutely the same for all. Divine unity, divine personality, are here utterly unproved. "Why should we rest in our inductive inference of one designer from the alleged phenomena of design, when these are claimed to be so varied and so complex?"

If the inference from design is to avail at all, it must avail to show that all the phenomena leading to misery and mischief, must have been designed and intended by a being finding pleasure in the production and maintenance of this misery and mischief. If the alleged constructor of the universe is supposed to have designed one beneficent result, must he not equally be supposed to have designed all results? And if the inference of benevolence and goodness be valid for some instances, must not the inference of malevolence and wickedness be equally valid from others? If, too, any inference is to be drawn from the illustration of organs in animals supposed to be specially contrived for certain results, what is the inference to be drawn from the many abortive and in-

complete organs, muscles, nerves, etc., now known to be traceable in man and other animals? What inference is to be drawn from each instance of deformity or malformation? But the argument from design, if it proved anything, would at the most only prove an arranger of pre-existing material; it in no sense leads to the conception of an originator of substance.

There is no sort of analogy between a finite artificer arranging a finite mechanism and an alleged divine creator originating all existence. From an alleged product you are only at liberty to infer a producer after having seen a similar product actually produced.

PRICE ONE PENNY

London: Printed by Annie Besant and Charles Bradlaugh
63, Fleet Street, London, E.C.-1887